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S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE

CHURCH OF WISBICH ST. PETER'S,

AT THE

A S S I Z E S

HELD IN THAT TOWN BEFORE

MR. SERJEANT FORSTER,

CHIEF-JUSTICE OF THE ISLE OF ELY,

ON

TUESDAY, AUGUST 6, 1771.

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By WILLIAM PURKIS, M.A.
FELLOW OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE,
AND
ONE OF HIS MAJESTY'S PREACHERS AT WHITEHALL.

C A M B R I D G E,

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M. DCC. LXXII.

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TO THE
INHABITANTS
OF THE
TOWN OF WISBICH ST. PETER'S,
IN THE
ISLE OF ELY,
THE FOLLOWING SERMON,
IS
(WITH GREAT ESTEEM AND REGARD)
INSCRIBED BY
THEIR SINCERE FRIEND
AND VERY OBEDIENT SERVANT,
WILLIAM PURKIS.



M A T T H. VII. 13.

WIDE IS THE GATE, AND BROAD IS THE WAY THAT
LEADETH TO DESTRUCTION, AND MANY THERE BE
WHICH GO IN THEREAT.

IT is much to be lamented that the Goodness of Men's Lives does not keep Pace with the Knowledge of their Duty. Although they every Day find repeated Arguments in Favour of Virtue and Religion, yet we see them still blindly submitting to the Fury of their Passions, or wilfully pursuing what they know to be wrong. Too many have violated the Laws they approved, and insulted the Majesty they revered: Too many have ungratefully despised the Forgiveness they stood in Need of, and hazarded the Happiness they wished for.

THIS Observation holds particularly in those Periods of Society, when the Manners of the People are highly cultivated and refined. In the rude Beginnings of every State Men must necessarily be very limited in their Notions: The Sug-
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gestions of the Heart are alone pursued as they feel themselves warmed with Gratitude, or inflamed by Desire. But by conversing with each other, their Faculties are expanded and improved; they acquire more just, and more rational Notions for their Conduct in general; they consider with more Precision the Extent, and Excellence of the moral Duties, and perceive more clearly the natural Rewards of Virtue. Yet, were we to pursue a Comparison, the moral Conduct of the most polished State would not, I fear, surpass that of the rude and ignorant. The Impurity and Disingenuity of the One, might aptly be opposed to the unfeeling, and sanguinary Excesses of the Other: The studied Regard to Ceremony in the Former, is excelled by the Latter's invariable and firm Attachment to Integrity. It is amongst the civilized Nations where plain Honesty is often quibbled away, and we are shocked at the many Violations of good Faith, and the flagrant Instances of Ingratitude. But few People, however gross and ignorant, have been found capable at first of returning a Kindness with Insult, or betraying the Person who has given them Protection.

SHALL we then say, that a Cultivation of Manners, an Improvement in Knowledge, true Notions of Religion, or proper Laws of human Injunction, serve but little, either to regulate the Principles, to rectify the Heart, or to quiet the Passions of Men? This can by no means be the Truth. Our coolest, and most dispassionate Reason bids us declare, that, without a proper Cultivation, the noblest Faculties of our Nature would, like the unwrought Ore, be lost while concealed:

cealed: that, without an Improvement in Knowledge, Society would be altogether imperfect: that, without religious Principles our Wisdom and Abilities would degenerate into Subtilty and Craft: and that, if human Laws did not lend their Aid, the violent Passions would break through every other Restraint, and destroy that Peace and Confidence which is the End and Ornament of social Life. The Universe itself is complicated and beautiful, and the Destruction of the minutest Class of Insects might disturb the whole. So the removal of any of the Supports of Society might either destroy its Design, or debase its Nature. And, to pursue the Allusion, as the most necessary Parts of the natural World carry with them the Seeds of Corruption, so we must be obliged to confess that every Improvement in Society, every new Object, carries with it some Chance of new Temptations, and as St. Paul justly observes, *If the Law had not said, Thou shalt not covet, I had not known Sin.** Yet surely this Imperfection in Society; this Increase of Evils in Life, while we are endeavouring to increase its Blessings, ought not to render us negligent of its Laws, or careless about its Improvement. But on the contrary, Men should recollect, that if, with all the utmost Assistance of Cultivation of Manners, Knowledge, Religion and Laws, the Passions are so liable to excess, how dreadful would the Evils be, were we let loose upon each other with the additional Powers of Art and Cunning. *Wide is the Gate, and broad indeed is the Way that leadeth to Destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.†*

* Rom. vii. 7.

† Matth. vii 13.

OUR Blessed Saviour's Observation is general and extensive. It concerns not less our temporal than our eternal Welfare. It comprehends the numberless Temptations in Life which beset us on all sides: Not those only, which arise from our irregular Passions and Desires; but such as proceed from our Prejudices; from our different Stations in Life; from the Imperfections of Laws; from the *Cultivation* and *Improvements* in Society. To the consideration of this last particular I will confine myself at present (and the Manners of the Times strongly lead me to it) and will endeavour to urge the Expediency of Laws, and a due Observance of them, from the various Crimes and Immoralities, which necessarily arise from a Change in the Manners, Principles, and Customs of the World.

It has been triflingly enough objected against Religion, by Infidels, and by fanciful Theorists in Legislation, that the convincing the Understanding only, would prevent Men from vicious Courses. But a little Attention will tell us, that such an Attempt is both impracticable in itself, and insufficient for the Purpose. Reason operates slowly and unequally. Vanity will oppose the plainest Truths. Revenge will counteract the best Designs, and the Fury of Desire, like a Tempest, level all Distinctions of Duty, Justice, or Reason. To confirm this, any Day's Experience, any Page of History need only be attended to. Men of the best Heads have been guilty of the worst Actions in Opposition to the clearest Dictates of their own Minds. But could Reason at one Period of Life regulate Men's Conduct, yet what shall

shall we say to those various Incitements to Vice, which incidentally arise from new Connections in the World, from new Objects, and from new powers of Gratification? We had found a Remedy for the Diseases already known, but surely the Frame may be disordered by new and different Causes. The Vices which in one Age can scarcely be restrained, in another are almost forgotten. The Temptations which in one Country are found difficult to be resisted, in another carry with them but little Inducement. Yet Reason would condemn alike every Excess; and were we to be governed by that cool, dispassionate Monitor, the loose Desires of an Eastern-Court; the dark Designs of an Italian-Assassin; the general disposition to Drunkenness amongst the Inhabitants of the Northern Climates, would be equally corrigible in every Place. Although the Temptations might be stronger in the different Countries, yet the Reason for resisting them would of course increase, and Men would not be found precipitately urged on by different Passions, could we suppose them alike capable of weighing the Consequences of their Actions. That this is not a fanciful Refinement, we need only observe the Judgment with which wise Law-givers have restrained more severely some Excesses, and scarcely noticed others; while in different Climates the opposite is necessary.

BUT still farther: To a Person the least acquainted with History, nothing appears more striking than the difference of the Manners of the same People in different Ages. It is little more than two Centuries, since the Nations of Europe emerged
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from Gothic Ignorance, and Monkish Superstition. The confined Circle in which Men acted before this memorable Event took Place, circumscribed both their Faculties and Desires. The wonderful Invention of Printing, Improvement in Navigation, and the Discovery of new Countries, as they afforded new Objects, created new Desires. But while the Wealth of each Nation increased as its Commerce extended, this very Increase of Wealth has introduced the Luxuries of every Climate. From the Excellence of our Constitution, and the Advantages of our Situation, the Commerce of this Kingdom is superior to every other. Our Progress in Arts, Elegance, and Refinement, has surpassed every one's Expectation. Yet, has this Elegance brought with it a Love of Indolence; this Refinement ridiculous Desires; and each Improvement (how valuable soever in itself) a Probability of new Excesses. To instance but in one; that Ease and Convenience which we in this Country have lately experienced, in an easy Communication with distant Places, may open such a Source for Luxury, Extravagance, and Dissipation, as, if not guarded against, may be productive of real Crimes. A Power of gratifying our Curiosity, or our Vanity, prompts us too often to the Enjoyment, and we feel, too late, that Distress and Ruin are the certain Attendants of our immoderate Gratification. It requires, therefore, at all Times, a particular Regard to the Manners of a People, lest from any supposed national Advantage, the Increase of Vice should exceed the Improvement that is designed.

To evince this still farther: Let any Person recollect, that
Laws

Laws may be so framed as to be injurious to the Individual, while the Benefit is rather specious than solid to the Community; or that, while they give a temporary Strength to one Member, they may weaken the whole Frame; again, that penal Sanctions may be so multiplied, as to level all Distinction of Crimes, and by rendering Men desperate, may urge them to commit at first the greatest Enormities. When the Manners of a People are thus liable to change, (and in a commercial State they will ever be so) the utmost Address is necessary to adapt the Laws to the Exigencies of the Times. The People may be too fond of Novelty, and by that Means destroy the End of all Laws. The State itself, may be too slow, in repealing what is obsolete, or injoining what is proper. It might be agreeable to the Spirit of the Empire of the *Medes* and *Persians*, that their Laws should not alter. But it gives us a very inferior Notion of that Government, which confined Men to the first Institutes of rude Legislation, and would not permit them to extend their Aim to any Improvement. In the *East* this Conduct prevails still, and we find the Conveniences of Life are enjoyed there but by a very few. While the Court abounds with a Profusion of Luxuries, the Subject is oppressed, and, at a Word robbed of his Property and of his Life, by those summary and violent Laws, which ought only to take Place in Nations but just emerging from Barbarism. How advantageous is the Comparison to us, who live under a Government, allowed on all Hands to be the best planned for the Security of itself, and the Happiness of the People!

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To complain of the Restraint of the Laws, and to say that our *Knowledge* of what is proper might suffice, argues but flight Observation. For the Truth is, that improved Abilities, in the Hands of a bad Man, may be made Use of to *strengthen himself in his Wickedness*. He may take unfair Opportunities over others Ignorance: He may treacherously deceive the unwary, and wantonly oppress the weak.

THAT *religious Considerations* must have great Influence over an enlightened People, is a general Truth. Yet as Scepticism is frequently the Consequence of refined Speculation, the Learned we know have been tempted to argue away the Doctrines of Religion, or to attack its Evidence: And the Ignorant, if not restrained by Laws, would neglect to reverence its Precepts, and in the Violence of their Passions, reject its Promises, or despise its Threats.

A REGARD to *Honour* is still less sufficient to conduct Men in Life. For as this can prevail only amongst a few, and its Standard is precarious, the Assassin may plead it in favour of Murder: The Adulterer will make Use of it to defend himself in his Crimes: And the Robber will acquit himself by it, in his lawless Invasion of the Rights of others.

NOR lastly: can we presume the Principles of *Integrity* will operate upon all, however strongly they may prevail with some. The Reward annexed to Honesty is not always discovered,

vered, nor the Breach of it always ruinous; too many will therefore pursue oblique Paths to purchase Gratification: and it is a melancholy Truth, that by such Methods too many succeed. So that if we remove the Restraint of human Laws, not only the Peace, but the very Existence of Society would be destroyed; and Men with every other Aid both of Knowledge, Refinement in Manners, Integrity and Religion, would be afraid and incapable of conversing with each other.

It recurs then for us to observe such Cautions in our Conduct as may duly enforce those Laws which are necessary; and which the general Consent of other Nations allows to be framed amongst us in the best Manner, human Policy has attempted, for the Safety, the Peace, and the Comfort of every Individual.

AND first. We must remember that as the utmost which all human Laws can attain to, is an outward Restraint upon Men's Actions, in order to render that firm and lasting, a Principle of Religion ought to be inculcated and adopted by every Class of People. Otherwise Diffimulation will prevail: Crimes which in their Nature cannot be judged by Men, will spring up: The Hypocrite will contrive; the Libertine will indulge himself in his private Vices; and the black Designs of Revenge will be carried on with a Countenance that wears the Smiles of Friendship. — The Great therefore who hold Religion cheap, who neglect its Duties in publick, who

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indulge themselves in a Course of Life inconsistent with its Precepts, how wrong do they act? They rob the Laws of a powerful Sanction; they weaken the Designs of them, and increase their natural Imperfections. Well may they complain that the lower Classes of People are outrageous: They teach them to be so. Well may they find their Inferiors difficult to be governed: The Great themselves will not submit. Well may they complain of a Contempt of Authority: They themselves despise the Authority of God. It is then the essential Duty of every Man of Property and of Consequence, that He, by his own Example, should give a Support to the Laws He has either assisted in framing, or is called upon to execute.

It is altogether proper that this Trust should be committed to Persons of Rank and Fortune; for although they are not uniformly Obedient themselves, yet as Magistrates, they are less liable to Corruption and Error, than those who are engaged in the lower Offices of Life. As they ought to set an Example of Obedience, so ought they in each particular to act with Impartiality and Compassion. Let Laws be ever so well planned or well understood, yet much of their good Effect depends upon their Execution. It is in this the Man of Property appears in the most advantageous Light. And it is much to be lamented, that this Place has lately lost (out of the most useful Class of Magistrates) *One* whose dispassionate Execution of Justice, whose solid Judgment, and whose unbiaſſed Integrity rendered Him in this Respect (what
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He was in many others) as truly useful to the Publick as He was dear and valuable to his private Friends.*

It concerns the *Middle Rank* of People to preserve a firm and fixed Attention to Laws which are framed to protect their Rights. It is the great, the inestimable Blessing of the British Constitution that the Property of any Person cannot be disposed of, nor his Life adjudged, but by the determination of his Equals. To pervert this Right by a Spirit of Faction against the Government, or of Contention with each other, is turning our arms against ourselves, and in the End must be productive of the worst of Consequences.

To the Poor what can be more beneficial than that they should be protected from Violence and Oppression? To repine at their Inequality of Station, and to copy the Excesses of the Great, robs them of that Comfort which often the Great are Strangers to, and brings them to Crimes which they once
would

* John Southwell, Esq; the only remaining Male-Heir of a very respectable Family : He died of a violent Fever, July 16, 1771, in the 35th Year of his Age, after a few Days Illness. A truly excellent Character! The very large Commerce He was engaged in with the highest Reputation caused Him to be very generally known; and his great Abilities and Readiness to exert them for the good of others, procured Him a very extensive Influence. The real Sorrow at his Death amongst every *Rank* of People in the *Country* where he lived shewed how highly he was esteemed. — The Author was happy in a long and very intimate Friendship with him, during which He had frequent Opportunities of being witness to many of the noblest Instances of *Benevolence* and real *Goodness*.

The Author hopes that his Townsmen will impute the length of Time between the Delivery of this Discourse and its Publication to this Melancholy Event. It is with Difficulty He can now review a Subject which brings to his Mind every Circumstance attending the heavy Loss He experienced.

would have shuddered at. It is, I fear, too true that the Distresses of the Poor are rather increased than diminished by the Refinements of the present Age. If this be really so, and they have true Cause of Complaint, let them not seek Redress by open Violation of the Laws. The Evils they feel can by that means only be increased. It is by a due Subordination that we live comfortably and happily: And Frugality, Industry and Honesty can only secure this Blessing for any Time. While therefore too many by openly contemning the sacred Truths of the Gospel disgrace and weaken the Laws of their Country; and others disturb them by listening to the dark Designs of disappointed Ambition, let us *submitting ourselves one to another in the fear of God,* be obedient according to the Flesh, in Singleness of Heart: Not with Eye-Service as Men-pleasers only, but as the Servants of Christ, doing the Will of God from our Hearts.†*

* Ephes. v. 21.

† Ephes. vi. 5, 6.

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